

Field Report

King Range National Conservation Area

■ 1.0 Summary

The King Range National Conservation Area (NCA) is a remote site boasting a unique natural environment. While the site accommodates multiple uses, the primary visitation experiences sought are solitude and an unspoiled natural environment. Conservation and restoration of the environment are key objectives of the site's management program. The site is accessed via steep, winding, and often unpaved roadways. Distances and visitation patterns often require visitors to bring multiple vehicles into the site, hitchhike, or use jitney shuttles to travel from one end of the King Range NCA to another.

While the need for alternative transportation is not great, shuttles do enhance and accommodate the visitor experience, increase safety, and reduce environmental impacts caused by personal vehicles. BLM support for a shuttle service contracted out to private operators would enable broader promotion of this alternative, potentially increasing the benefits mentioned above.

■ 2.0 Background Information

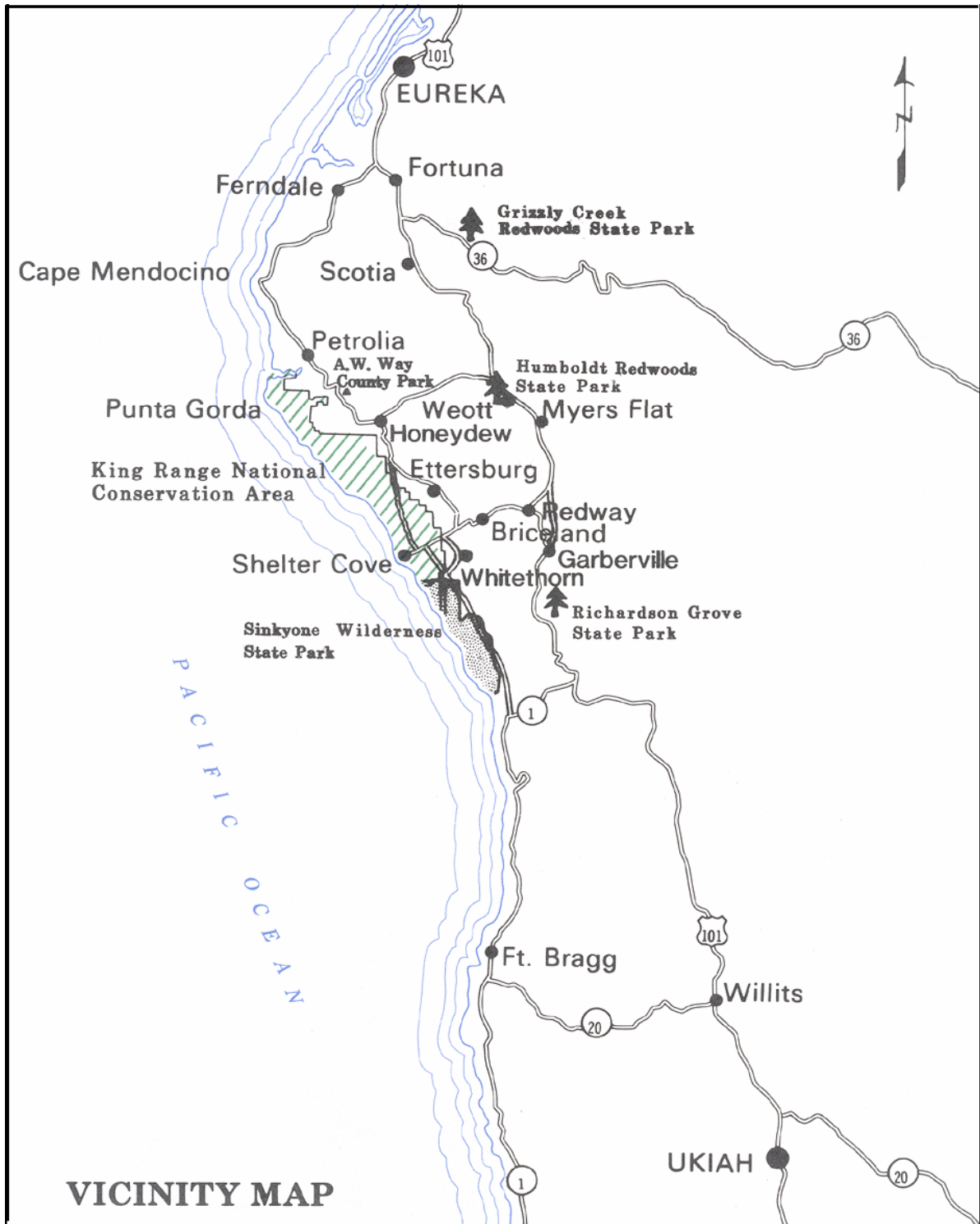
2.1 Location

The King Range NCA is located on the coast in rural Humboldt County, California, approximately 230 road miles north of San Francisco and 70 miles south of Eureka on Highway 101. Most visitors exit Highway 101 in the vicinity of Redway/Garberville and continue west for another 22 miles on Shelter Cove Road. Visitors can also access the Area through the communities of Petrolia (45 miles via Ferndale) and Honeydew (23 miles). Figure 1 illustrates the general location of the King Range NCA.

2.2 Administration and Classification

The King Range NCA was the first such conservation area to be designated by Congress in 1971. It is administered by the BLM under the Arcata Field Office. Six full-time employees are based at this site, with a total of 10 to 15 employees during seasonal peaks.

Figure 1. General Location of the King Range National Conservation Area



2.3 Physical Description

The King Range NCA comprises roughly 60,000 acres, stretching approximately 35 miles from north to south. Public lands continue for roughly another 20 miles along the coast in the adjoining Sinkyone Wilderness State Park. The Area surrounds the unincorporated community of Shelter Cove, which is located along the coast near the southern boundary as well as several additional private inholdings.

The dominant feature of the area is the King Range, which rises abruptly from the coastline. Kings Peak attains an elevation of 4,087 feet within three miles of the ocean. The terrain is quite rugged, forcing Highway 1 inland to the south. The mountains are a mix of Douglas fir forest, chaparral and grassland, providing habitat for a variety of wildlife, including the spotted owl. In addition to the coastal environment which supports a variety of marine life, streams running from the mountains to ocean provide habitat and spawning grounds for salmon and trout.

The King Range NCA offers a rare coastal wilderness experience, a dramatic change of seasons, and a coastline which is constantly reshaped by natural forces. In addition to approximately 80 miles of hiking and equestrian trails, there are six campsites which offer picnic tables, fire rings, and pit toilets but no hookups. A network of mostly unpaved and typically steep and winding roads provides access to trailheads, campsites, and parking areas. A relatively new field office and information center located in the vicinity of Thorn Junction on Shelter Cove Road.

Figure 2 provides a more detailed view of the King Range NCA.

2.4 Mission and Goals

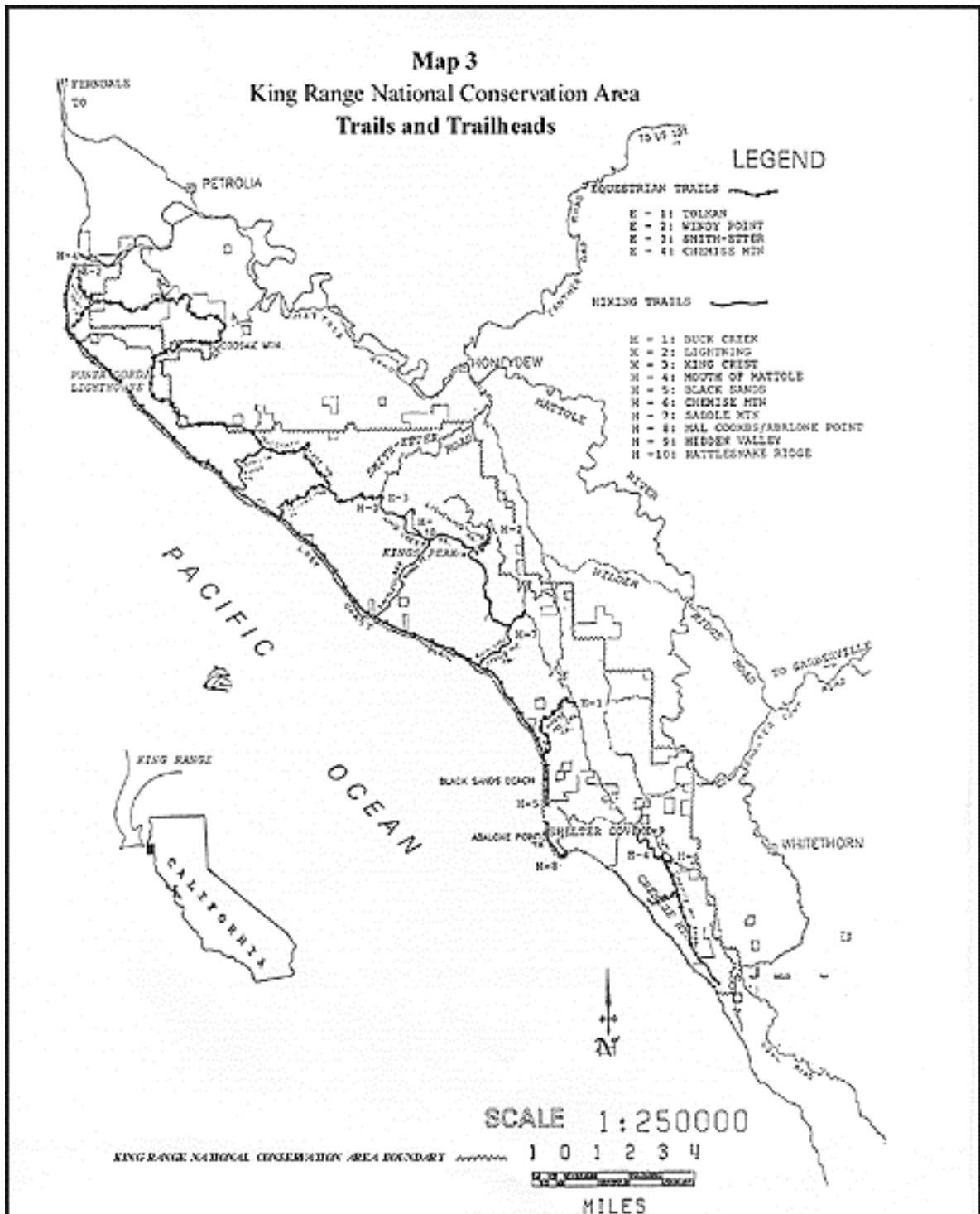
The management program at the King Range NCA “is designed to insure management and development of the Area for the benefit of the people of the United States under the principles of multiple use and the sustained yield of renewable natural resources.”

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

The typical visitor to the King Range NCA comes for a primitive, back country hiking and camping experience. Most visitors are from the San Francisco Bay Area or the Sacramento area, tend to be highly educated, and have access to the Internet. The King Range NCA is a destination for most visitors, who have planned their trip in advance.

In 1998, the site saw 132,000 visitors. Visitation has been steadily increasing over the past five years. Features in outdoor, recreation, and travel magazines have helped spur this trend. Visitation peaks during the spring break period (mid-March through mid-April) and in the summer (Memorial Day through September). There are smaller peaks coinciding with specialized recreation such as winter surfing. Staff estimate that about 40 percent of visits the King Range NCA are one to two days and another 40 percent are from two to seven days duration.

Figure 2. Detailed Map of King Range National Conservation Area



While the overall area of the King Range NCA is large, the hikeable beaches and canyons are fairly small, a factor which will limit visitation. Back country permits are sometimes limited on holiday weekends.

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

3.1 Transportation

Roads and Parking

Guide books and travel articles consistently mention the challenging driving conditions and relatively poor road conditions in and around the King Range NCA. Where paved roads exist, they are extremely steep and winding. Unpaved roads, classified as “grav-eled” and “primitive” on the official site map are, in addition, very narrow (see Figure 3 for illustration of typical road). Environmental concerns largely preclude upgrading or expanding the road system.

Figure 3. King Peak Road



The roads leading to the King Range NCA are maintained by the county of Humboldt while those wholly within the park are under BLM jurisdiction. BLM-maintained roads are not currently eligible for federal lands highway money. County roads would have to be upgraded as well before becoming eligible for federal highway money. Thus, the road network in and around the King Range NCA is most likely to remain in its current condition and extent.

Although no traffic counts are available, staff estimate that from one to three vehicles are typically using or parked on the graveled and primitive roads at any given time, with the exception of deer season when 15 to 20 vehicles may be present. These estimates would be in addition to vehicles parked at the main entrance points and parking at these areas is an issue identified both by staff and in the 1992 *Visitor Services Plan*: “Increase in visitation along the Lost Coast Trail has prompted concern over the effect to coastal wildlife, the existing facilities are inadequate and outdated to handle modern recreational vehicle and visitor demand for secure parking...”

The Lost Coast Trail is a primary attraction which extends for 24 miles along the coastline within the King Range NCA. Due to prevailing winds, the recommended direction of travel for coastal hikes is from north to south. Key entry or staging points serving this visitation pattern are found at the Mattole Campground to the north, which is reached by Lighthouse Road from Petrolia, and the Black Sands Beach area, which is accessible via Shelter Cove Road and Beach Road from the towns of White Thorn, Briceland, Redway, and Garberville.

The parking lot at Black Sands Beach has been washed out by a storm, requiring vehicles to be parked in inadequate space along the roadside (see Figures 4 and 5). During the July 4th weekend this year, approximately 50 vehicles were parked in this area overnight. Even more vehicles might have been left in this area if it were not for the jitney shuttles (see below) which draw parking demand away from the beach and towards Shelter Cove. Plans are in place to rebuild this parking lot on higher ground within the next year.

A recent survey showed that most visitors access the park via Shelter Cove Road, or at least use this facility at some point in their trips. Many visitors first stop at the new field office to orient themselves and get information on site conditions before proceeding on their planned itinerary.

Figure 4. End of Beach Road Looking Toward Black Sands Beach



Figure 5. Former Site of Parking Lot at Black Sands



Jitney Shuttles

Because of the distances involved, visitation patterns, and the challenging driving conditions, visitors often bring two vehicles to the Area, leaving one vehicle at the planned endpoint of their journey (e.g., Shelter Cove) and driving the other to the starting point. The second vehicle is then driven back to retrieve the first vehicle. At times, visitors attempt to hitchhike to their starting points or back to their vehicles.

Alternatively, visitors may use informal jitney services operated by local residents. While the BLM does not promote or provide information on these services, it is generally known that the deli in Shelter Cove serves as a broker for individual operators who will provide shuttle services on demand. Typical fares have recently ranged from \$80 to \$120 per person, which is not unreasonable considering the three-hour round trip travel time between the northern and southern staging points and the considerable wear and tear on vehicles. The jitneys typically carry two to four passengers in sport utility vehicles, vans, and pickup trucks with camper shells. Operations have been characterized as marginally profitable and probably not meeting insurance and other regulatory requirements. However, the BLM has no jurisdiction over the county roads on which the jitneys mainly operate.

Existing Transit

There is currently no existing transit service to the King Range NCA. One Greyhound bus per day serves the town of Garberville, approximately 25 miles east and an hour's journey east of the site.

3.2 Community Development

The surrounding communities are small (none are incorporated) and somewhat ambivalent about the economic benefits increased visitation might bring. Many residents settled in this area seeking solitude and a rural lifestyle. In addition, the carrying capacity of the King Range NCA will remain limited if it is to retain its primitive character and protected environment. At the same time, there is an active Chamber of Commerce which promotes the King Range NCA by giving away maps.

There is also the community of Shelter Cove, a somewhat anomalous private development, which has been interested in improving the roads to the community. Shelter Cove is a destination which attracts a somewhat different type of visitor than the typical King Range NCA backpacker. For example, a large number of boats launch from the Shelter Cove boat ramp at the opening of salmon season.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resources

Humboldt County maintains three roads that run within the Area to fairly minimal standards. Additional roads within the Area are maintained by the BLM with the objective of minimizing sediment discharge to streams. Improving, widening, or otherwise upgrading the roads to higher standards is not possible due to the environmental impacts involved.

3.4 Recreation

The King Range NCA hosts a wide variety of recreational activities including hiking, hunting, and camping in the mountains and surfing, fishing, abalone diving, and beach combing along the coast. The Big Flat area, approximately eight miles north of Black Sands Beach along the Lost Coast Trail, is a popular location for surfing. Previously, many visitors used All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) or motorized boats to reach backcountry portions of the coastline. However, public use of motorized vehicles is now prohibited along the entire coastal corridor to maintain the area's primitive character.

■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Unit Plans

The Area's original management plan was prepared in 1974 and has subsequently been amended but not completely updated. All planning efforts, such as the 1992 *Visitor Services Plan*, have taken place within the context of the management plan. Implementation of the management plan has focussed on acquiring private land within the King Range NCA boundaries, removal of degraded logging roads to improve stream habitats, and balancing a variety of uses within the area, including grazing, and recreation.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

The BLM coordinates with a number of agencies in managing the site. These include the California Department of Fish and Game for management of fish and wildlife habitats and the California Division of Forestry in planning and conducting fire protection activities. Although a state park abuts the Area immediately to the south, coordination with the California Department of Parks and Recreation has not been extensive to date.

■ 5.0 Assessment of Need for ATS

5.1 Magnitude of Need

The current need for Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) at the King Range NCA is fairly low. Visitation levels are comparatively low, the capacity of the site will remain limited, and the area is quite remote. Nonetheless, the role of shuttles could be expanded to provide some benefit, as described below.

5.2 Feasible Alternatives

A shuttle serving the gateway communities and popular staging points could be run as a private concession. The shuttle would likely serve major embarkation points such as Mattole Campground, Black Sands Beach, and potentially other trailheads and recreation sites within the King Range NCA. In addition, a shuttle could serve the adjacent Sinkyone Wilderness State Park to facilitate a seamless recreational experience for visitors.

The standard BLM concession contract involves taking three percent of the concessionaire's gross as a fee. However, given the likely marginal profitability of such a shuttle service, this arrangement would probably not be economically feasible. An alternative would involve some level of support from the BLM, such as purchase of a vehicle or vehicles and provision of insurance. The vehicle operation and maintenance could then

be contracted out to independent contractors on a fee basis. Without the need to service a large capital investment, local contractors could afford to be flexible about providing the service on a part-time, as-needed basis (there would be little or no demand during the winter). This arrangement would also provide some economic benefit to the local community, and would likely be better received than any operation which directly competed with or put jitney operations out of business.

The shuttle service would remain a fairly modest operation. Since many visitors do at least some research on the site in advance, they would be able to plan their trip around a once- or twice-a-day shuttle (a recent survey showed that 86 percent of the visitors had access to the Internet, so this medium could be used to provide information about the service). One or two vehicles could be used to provide this service.

While the issue of fares for a shuttle were not discussed, it is likely that visitors would be willing to pay at least as much as the jitney operations currently charge. These fares could go towards offsetting the cost of acquiring and performing major maintenance on the vehicle(s). The vehicles themselves would likely be some type of four-wheel drive; perhaps a large truck, van, or sport utility vehicle and should include racks or storage space for camping gear.

While current alternative transportation needs are not large, a shuttle service supported by BLM could provide some significant benefits. As natural resource protection is primary at this site, major expansions or large scale improvements to roads and parking areas are not viable options. While some improvements may be pursued to make areas safer or more accessible (e.g., realignment of dangerous curves), the basic character of the roads will remain consistent with area management goals.

A shuttle could help accommodate steadily increasing visitation levels by potentially reducing the number of personal autos brought to the site. Parties could make do with only one vehicle or even park in a nearby gateway community. A shuttle would also provide some safety benefits, by reducing the number of inexperienced drivers negotiating difficult roads. Finally, a shuttle ride could be an opportunity to educate visitors about low impact camping practices, an issue of increasing concern at the King Range NCA.

■ 6.0 Bibliography

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King Range National Conservation Area Proposed Management Plan, United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, May 1974.

■ 7.0 Persons Interviewed

Gary Pritchard-Peterson, King Range NCA Manager

Bob Wick, Recreation Planner